The Korean War

Prelude to War

In the late 1800s, Japan was a rising military and industrial power in the Far East. In 1895 it gained control of the Korean peninsula and formally annexed it to Japan in 1910. The defeat of Japan by the Allied forces in World War II forced the Japanese occupation forces to leave Korea. As a result, Soviet troops occupied the area of Korea north of the 38th parallel, and U.S. troops occupied the southern half of the peninsula.

Causes of the War

The Korean War was a part of the wide-ranging conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union known as the *Cold War*. The United Nations (U.N.) had decided that elections should be held in 1947 throughout Korea to decide on a form of government for the country. In 1948 the people of South Korea elected their own government and established democratic institutions. The Soviet Union was unwilling to allow elections in North Korea and formed a puppet regime there. Despite clashes between North and South Korean troops along the border between the two countries, the United States withdrew its troops in 1949. This was interpreted as a lack of interest in this part of the world, which triggered the North Koreans and their communist sponsors—the Soviet Union and China—to attack South Korea.

The Conflict Begins

Troops from communist North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. The United Nations called the invasion a violation of international peace and demanded immediate withdrawal of the troops, but the North Koreans ignored these demands. The U.N. voted to take action and assist the South Koreans in their fight against the communist aggressors. Because the Soviet Union had been boycotting the U.N. over Nationalist China's membership in the U.N. Security Council, it was unable to veto the Security Council Resolution.

Forty-one countries sent aid, food, or military supplies to the South. With the support of Congress, President Harry Truman ordered U.S. forces into action on June 30 (although war was never officially declared). Eventually, the United States provided about 90% of the troops and equipment used by the allies during the war. When the hostilities broke out, the North Korean army had about 135,000 soldiers, and the South Korean forces numbered about 95,000.

American Troops Arrive

U.S. troops landed south of the capital at Seoul and engaged North Korean troops on July 5. Seoul had already been captured by communist forces. Despite the arrival of a U.S. Marine brigade and the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division and other units in late July, the Allies were pushed to the southern tip of the Korean peninsula by August 2. They formed the Pusan Perimeter and fought intensely to prevent the total collapse of South Korea.

Reading Passages

The Korean War (cont.)

The Pusan Perimeter

The fighting at the Pusan Perimeter cost North Korea about 58,000 soldiers. In a series of battles, the American troops were able to reinforce their units, bring superior air power to bear, and fight the North Koreans to a draw. In mid-September 1950, General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of the allied armed forces, planned and executed the landing of American forces at Inchon on the northwest coast of South Korea. The landing took North Korea by surprise. This immediately relieved pressure on the allied troops along the Pusan Perimeter by cutting off North Korean troops from their supply line. American troops then broke out of the Pusan line, inflicted heavy losses on the North Koreans, and moved north.
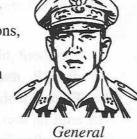
Allied Forces Invade North Korea

In October, South Korean and American forces invaded North Korea and captured several cities. Despite Chinese warnings to move back, MacArthur tried to push into the heart of North Korea and end the war. The Chinese attacked in far greater numbers than the Americans had anticipated and rapidly pushed them south—in the process splitting apart the two American commands. On December 4, 1950, some 20,000 U.S. Marines and other soldiers began a slow retreat from the Changjin Reservoir in North Korea called the "Frozen Chosun" to a port at Hungnam, where they were evacuated after a heroic and costly series of battles that held back part of the Chinese army.

Communist Counterattack

The Chinese and North Korean forces recaptured Seoul but were then pushed back by American troops led by General Matthew Ridgeway. The conflict gradually developed into a stalemate, a battle for the hills and other strategic positions along the 38th parallel. Truce talks began in July 1951 but continued inconclusively for two years while the armies jostled for position. In April 1951, President Truman removed General MacArthur from command because MacArthur had publicly advocated military options, including bombing part of China, which Truman and other leaders felt might lead to another world war.

General Douglas MacArthur

Truce

The most serious cause of the deadlocked peace talks was not the dividing line between North and South Korea, which would essentially follow the line of battle along the 38th parallel, but it was the question of voluntary *repatriation*, or return, of the soldiers involved in the fighting. Many soldiers fighting for the North Koreans and the Chinese did not want to return to their home countries, and the communist nations did not want to admit that some of its soldiers were unhappy. Peace was finally achieved in 1953 when Joseph Stalin, the communist ruler in the Soviet Union, died, and Dwight D. Eisenhower became the new American president.